

Why Involve the Teacher of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing On the Assessment Team and the IEP?

Hearing loss is not a learning disorder. Hearing loss by itself does not affect cognitive ability or disordered language. Hearing loss reduces the ability to overhear or benefit from incidental language learning, which is how most vocabulary and social behaviors are learned. Hearing devices do not restore typical hearing; this includes FM systems. Hearing loss causes a barrier to accessing teacher instruction and peer-to-peer communication, especially in a typical classroom where there is some background noise and the teacher is further than 3 feet from the student.

A student may be able to ‘hear’ the teacher, but miss enough of the speech sounds to not fully understand. The story in yellow illustrates the challenge of listening comprehension with fragmented hearing. This level of missing bits and pieces of speech is typical of what is faced by a child with optimally fit hearing aids. If you were very familiar with the story *The Country Mouse and the City Mouse* it may not be difficult for you to understand the story. If you had never heard the story, it would probably be difficult to understand who it was about and what happened. Certainly unknown vocabulary, listening at a distance and in a bit of noise in an active classroom all work together to make accessing what is said a considerable challenge.

*Won upon a time a itty
mow when to vit a untry
mow. The untry mow
live in a feel. EEE wuz lad
to shee hi zittyfren.
A too my ran abowda
feel and lay unt noo.*

As specified by the ADA, communication at school should be as effective for these students as it is for their peers so that they have an equal opportunity to obtain the same result or reach the same level of achievement as peers without hearing loss. At a minimum, auxiliary aids, services and accommodations are appropriate. Most students also need their unique learning issues specific to hearing loss to be directly addressed by a teacher of the deaf/hard of hearing.

Areas of learning most likely to be impacted by hearing loss:

- Vocabulary: Gaps due to decreased ability to overhear incidental language
- Early reading: Phonology/phonemic awareness issues related to not distinctly hearing speech sounds
- Language processing: Issues due to fragmented hearing, vocabulary gaps, syntax, listening rate, etc. Not understanding words in context.
- Syntax: Incomplete understanding of rules (i.e., cannot hear /s/ or /ed/ endings so do not understand plurals, possessives, past tense)
- Listening skills: Can be challenges with simple discrimination of sounds, phrases or comprehension of conversation or verbal instruction in class (they may hear but not process full meaning)
- Understanding intent/emotions of others and nonverbal social cues
- Viewing information from different perspectives; critical thinking
- Social language: Socially awkward due to delays in pragmatic language development, how to interact appropriately with peers
- Attention/distractibility: Periodic inattention due to listening fatigue and gaps in understanding; ‘tuning out’ when it is hard to understand
- Passive or immature skills in responding when they do not understand what was said; lack of self-advocacy
- Understanding group discussions or participating in small group work due to distance/noise in class and socially

Any of these areas can adversely impact school performance and social behavior. All of these issues can contribute to cumulative challenges in academic performance and school function over time.

Teachers of the deaf/hard of hearing can recommend assessments appropriate to identifying issues in these vulnerable areas. They can provide insights into team assessment results based on their knowledge of how hearing loss impacts development and learning. Only 1% of IEPs are for children who are deaf or hard of hearing. Viewing assessment results without these insights often causes these low incidence issues to go unrecognized. Teachers can provide inservice, training or consultation to school staff and families. They can assist in determining appropriate modifications and accommodations. While a special education teacher can address academic issues and a speech therapist can address speech/language issues, the teacher of the deaf/hard of hearing can address all of the issues above and support improvement in student performance, using knowledge specific to the learning needs of students with hearing loss.

